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ABSTRACT

The Yap Classroom Assessment Project is an attempt to introduce new methods of assessment, with an emphasis on performance assessment, into the practices of teachers in the Pacific, integrating the strengths of Yapese culture with children's education. The project, developed by the Pacific Region Educational Laboratory (PREL), concentrates on systemic reform and a sustained training program that trains Micronesian teachers in Yap sequentially and repeatedly over time. The model calls for onsite involvement of teachers throughout Yap, taking services to the schools, and for continuing teacher support. Each of four defined phases involves gradually moving training responsibilities from external resources to the Yap team, including introduction of expanded assessment knowledge and skills, teacher workshops, and finally training teachers independent of the PREL. The ultimate success of an endeavor of this sort depends on community involvement. The people and educators of Yap have demonstrated their involvement, and the training continues, evolving as it grows. (Contains 4 references.) (SLD)

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Assessment in the Pacific: The Yap Assessment Model

by Paul S. Piper

A group of women stand around a small plane singing, their voices blending into a haunting cadence. The plane idles on an old military runway on the island of Falalop in Woleai Atoll surrounded by dense vegetation. The women's song segues into laughter, the laughter into talk. The women hug each other, and several of them board the plane, which taxis down the runway, gaining speed, finally lifting off where broken asphalt becomes jungle. The plane disappears in a limpid sky which is reflected below in an equally vast, equally blue expanse of ocean dotted by an infrequent atoll, rich green ringed with white sand, and lighter shades of blue.

Contrary to how this scenario might seem, it is not an advertisement for an ecotour in paradise, but rather signifies a further step in one of the most exciting educational innovations yet attempted in the Pacific, The Yap Classroom Learning Assessment Project.

These women are educators on their way home from a week-long assessment training institute on the remote island of Falalop in Woleai Atoll, Yap State. From where the plane landed one week ago these educators, and others, traveled by plane, boat, and canoe to a classroom at the Falalop Woleai Elementary School. They had traveled over open ocean and lagoon waters from the islands of Seliap, Wottegai, Falalis, and Tegailap. Their journey to Falalop Woleai was over, but another, much longer journey had just begun. The journey to successfully integrate the strengths of Yapese culture with their children's education.

The week has been a long one, the classroom hot and crowded. As several curious children peek through the louvered windows, trainers cover the bare walls with sheets of butcher paper on which they write questions like "Why do we assess?" and "Who uses assessment information?" These questions work like elemental catalysts to trigger insights, reactions, memories, and emotions from the educators present. Assessment becomes a mechanism for feedback, necessary for both student and teacher, and instrumental to the teaching process. Stories seep their way into the bilingual discussions. The room erupts with laughter. The sheets of paper cover the walls. More and more questions stare out at the people in the room. More children appear at the window. One of the educators steps to the front of the room and states that "we need to brainstorm and heartstorm what should be the outcomes of our schools." I don't think anyone could say it any better than that. Outside the windows, trade winds buffet the palm leaves and skud cumulus clouds across the sky. And a minor miracle goes on in a place called Yap.

The week culminates with a feast and celebration at which traditional chiefs hand out certificates of accomplishment to the teachers. Many members of the Falalop community celebrate with them. To them, the education of their children is an essential part of their lives.

A Brief History of Assessment

Assessment as we know it started back in the 1920s when the world was a very different place. Social forces were at work that dictated a very different set of social parameters than we now face. A wide variety of economic opportunities existed which required schools to sort students into various categories so that they could be slotted into the work force at an appropriate level. Schools also had

the task of standardizing and homogenizing the experience of the diverse ethnic population that was arriving daily from Europe. Compulsory school attendance had also recently passed Congress and had been signed into law. These social forces set up the demand for what essentially amounted to assembly line schools; schools that spread students along a skills continuum and dropped them into the appropriate slots. To support this infrastructure, a new type of test was required: a scientific, mass-produced, standardized test.

Several unintentional patterns emerged from the development, use, and proliferation of these standardized tests. The first was that the critical operations of teaching and assessing were split. Teachers were left in the classroom to teach, while the test designers, who became known as assessors, began operating in a very different world. Often housed at academic or research-based institutions, it wasn't long before they developed a highly rigorous, mathematically-oriented language that for all intentional purposes was unintelligible to teachers. In addition to creating a new language or jargon, assessors soon found themselves competing with educators for resources, and doing very well at it. Assessment today has become a billion-dollar enterprise.

The format emphasis of assessors became the paper and pencil test, particularly multiple choice where the answer is indicated by blackening in a space. These tests became even more popular once they could be corrected by machine. Administrators took advantage of the test's efficiency and ease of use, and layers of bureaucracy increased, creating even more distance between test results on one hand, and the student and teacher in the classroom on the other.

It is important to remember that these tests were originally designed to supplement the teacher's own methods of assessment, but that original design intention soon became supplanted by an accountability factor that was assigned to the tests. As early as the 1930s certain scholarships were linked to the test results, and by the 1960s the test was required as a determinant for entrance to high schools, colleges and universities. The decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw statewide and national testing standards. There was even talk about international testing standards. Many teachers, particularly teachers of those grades during which the test is given, found themselves spending an excessive amount of class time teaching students how to take, and to get high scores on these standardized tests. Many teachers were beginning to complain they didn't have enough time for their curriculum, and that the test scores yielded only a low resolution portrait of their students. In addition, with an emphasis being placed on parent and community involvement in education, the fact that neither parents, community members, students, nor teachers had any input into the composition of these tests became disturbing to many educators and non-educators alike.

Several factors have led to a change in the way many people view assessment by standardized tests. Some of these are: the learning expectations and approaches are more complex (we are moving from an industrial age to an information age), the shift toward "outcome based" education, the idea that the school-community should be at the heart of learning, the fact that many employers want to know a student's competence in real-life situations — not just in test scores, and the desire to reintegrate assessment with teaching.

A method of assessment commonly referred to as performance assessment is currently challenging the hierarchy of standardized testing. Performance assessment in a nutshell is observing, analyzing, and interpreting how a student performs certain tasks. Its two major components are a performance task that evokes the complex skills and applications we wish to observe and clear, and criteria that describe the key qualities of a successful performance. These include such elements as direct writing, portfolios, exhibitions, demonstrations, self-evaluations, conferences, and so forth. Given the unfortunate split between teachers and assessors, many teachers find themselves in need of training in these new (many of which are actually quite old) methods of assessment. This need for training gave rise to the Yap project.

The Yap Assessment Model: Training Trainers

Interest in educational assessment in Yap State has been ongoing for a number of years. The desire was, and is, for assessment tools that accurately measure what is of value to the Yapese people for their children. There was concern that current assessment tools were not doing a complete job, that what the Yapese considered important outcomes of school were not being adequately evaluated or assessed. What eventually resulted from these concerns was a project developed by the Department of Education, that would attempt to address the need for a richer and more diverse array of assessment tools, assessments that would more clearly and deeply portray children's learning.

PREL's initial involvement began with a request from Yap's former Director of Education, Alfonso Fanechigiy. The project

was wonderfully consistent with PREL's mission to bring people together to serve and enrich Pacific education. Further discussion between Alfonso Fanechigiy, Pam Legdesog, and Rita Inos of PREL crystallized the project even further. Yap did not want "band-aid" or piecemeal approach, which often fails as soon as the initial wave of trainers leaves; rather they wanted a project that involved systemic reform, a sustained training program that trained trainers sequentially and repeatedly over time.

Named the **Yap Classroom Learning Assessment Project**, this model includes long-term, sustained support from within Yap for teacher development of assessment skills and knowledge; onsite involvement of teachers throughout Yap (taking services to the schools rather than holding single-site workshops); and training of trainers both in the content of assessment, and in coaching strategies for supporting teachers in their classrooms.

The Pacific Mathematics and Science Regional Consortium, charged with supporting systemic reform, was working with mathematics and science specialists throughout the Pacific Region to identify priority services and technical assistance. Working from Yap's proposal, and involving Yap's Math/Science specialists, Ginny Fenenigog and Stan Yiluy, PRESS (Pacific Region Effective and Successful Schools) trainer Tino Uolai, Staff Development Officer Lazarus Tawel, and chief of Curriculum and Instruction Rosa Tacheliol, the core group of trainers was formed.

It was decided that PREL would initially assume the role of training the core group of trainers, who would then train teachers. PREL trainers involved in the project were Pam Legdesog and Kathy Busick. The project was initially designed in four phases. Each of these phases in turn would have three geographical components: Mainland Yap, Ulithi Atoll, and Woleai Atoll.

Previously, much of the educational training was done in Mainland Yap, which forced teachers from neighboring islands to travel (often extensively) if they wanted to be involved. Since the distances and costs were often enormous, this was far from easy. An essential focus of this project was to physically provide training in the outlying islands and schools. Using this model, with each phase repeated at a location further removed from Mainland Yap, it was hoped that the changes would deeply root in the neighboring islands as well.

The phases were structured so that they would occur sequentially and, once begun, continue with the core group of trainers, and involve more and more of Yap's teachers until all have the chance to benefit. Each phase involves gradually moving training responsibilities from external resources to the Yap team, including introduction of expanded assessment knowledge and skills, teacher workshops co-trained by Yap's team, and finally, training teachers independent of PREL's assistance.

Between the formal phases, the model also includes: Yap's trainers expanding their training to full staff at individual schools, revision of training designs and materials, adaptations and modifications as needed to build on the cultures and environments of Yap State, and the addition of unique tasks and activities that grow out of Yap's curriculum.

The first phase in Yap took place in Colonia in February of 1993, and involved the entire training team. The initial part of this meeting involved the building of foundations, developing a common language for assessment, sharing experiences, developing trust, as well as an exploration of alternative assessment tools and brainstorming on the purposes of assessment. Working with thirty Mainland Yap elementary teachers, the training built on a shared vision for the children of Yap. Assessments tied to outcomes for schooling became the focus. Both in Colonia and the neighbor islands of Yap State, the initiative behind alternative assessment was not limited to the education community — traditional chiefs, parents, and local community members also felt that there was a great need for assessments that would provide clearer images of what their children were learning, and its relevance.

Teachers, parents, and students were involved in the Ulithi Phase 4 Assessment Workshop.

Traveling to Ulithi Atoll, Phase One trainers took the show on the road. Response was overwhelming. The Atoll's four elementary schools and high school were closed to allow teachers to partake in this special project. Since there are no substitute teachers in Yap, the dedication of community and local government to this project cannot be overstated. In Ulithi, all teachers experienced both the process and outcomes of the Mainland Yap training, and began developing assessment tools. Phase I also gave the original trainers a chance to refine their training techniques, improve communication, and in-

crease self-confidence and self-reliance.

During the Woleai segment of Phase One, the training team was on its own, and PREL's input was minimal. For this event, the generosity and excitement of the Yapese people was again evident. All Atoll elementary schools and the middle school closed, and several local chiefs attended the sessions.

Phase Two was called "Curriculum Connections" and began during the summer of 1993. In this phase, the assessment questions raised during Phase One were examined in relation to the curriculum and effective teaching. This phase capitalized on the fact that the teachers traveled to Mainland Yap for a yearly summer professional development program. For this phase, the Math and Science Specialists, along with Pam Legdesog, currently on a technical exchange with PREL, worked directly with teachers. Specifically, this phase addressed how to match assessment to the curriculum, and was science and math based.

Phase Three explored personal communication as a form of assessment: the types of questions asked, the styles in which they are asked, the documentation of question/responses, and how these relate to formal assessment. During this phase, the Yap Trainers incorporated coaching strategies with teachers. This phase again took place at all three locations. During this phase, with coaching, a lot of emphasis was placed on developing trust between teachers and trainers. Journals for recording insights and reflections were kept and discussed.

Phase Four began in the spring of 1995, and will also take place in Yap, Ulithi Atoll, and Woleai Atoll. Although there has been department pre-planning, identifying and developing state indicators (ways of using classroom data to indicate state trends), the Yap trainers have provided input based on their experience and feedback from teachers that will enhance and modify the original design, making this phase truly their own. This phase allows trainers and teachers to scrutinize criteria and performance, and examine methods of accurately and efficiently communicating growth and achievement to students. It also allows the examination of communication links between teacher and student, teacher and parent, and student and parent. Bringing the parents and community into the education process is viewed as vital, and sharing the developments in assessment with parents is viewed as a crucial step.

Assessment Training in Other Pacific Entities

Similar multi-phase assessment projects have been started in several other Pacific entities. In the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, teachers who make up the Math/Science Task Force have met for three one-week sessions that concluded with an assessment fair. At this fair, teacher developed tasks, criteria based on Math/Science standards, and other assessment related items were displayed. And science and math teachers in Pohnpei are involved in a similar project stressing the sustained training of trainers, coaching, and visiting school sites.

These models are all evolving from within, and as the trainers and teachers grow in confidence and experience, they make the content of effective assessment their own. And assessment is just the starting point. These evolving Pacific models have application for many other concerns and issues as well.

Conclusion

There *is* no conclusion to the work begun in this area, and perhaps a better way to look at it, is as an ongoing investigation. The assessment project in Yap has the critical momentum to carry it into other realms. What those will be is up to the people involved, and the results of previous work. Already the phases look a little different from their initial appearance and will continue to evolve. Summer workshops for phase one are being offered in Mainland Yap for all new teachers, and others that may have missed the initial round of training. Phase two has evolved into a two-credit course at the College of Micronesia.

The ultimate success of such a project depends on the commitment of the people involved, and educators, parents and community in Yap have demonstrated that success. Their concern and endurance is a model not only for other Pacific nations, but for anyone who is concerned about the context and meaning of education in their culture.

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